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SUBJECT: MISSION TEAM VISITS GIA LAI IN WAKE OF PROTESTS

Ref: A. HCMC 573 B. STATE 86031 C. HANOI 1076

[D](#). HANOI 1006

This is a joint Embassy/ConGen cable.

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Officials in Gia Lai province April 27-29 downplayed reports of violence connected to the April 10 events in the province, telling Mission poloffs that protests had taken place in nine locations, had involved a total of no more 1000-3000 demonstrators, and were quickly contained. They admitted three deaths, including one policeman. Missionoffs were unable to talk freely with local residents to assess these claims. There are some indications that the number of protesters and level of violence were greater than officials admit, but the demonstrations in Gia Lai seem to have been smaller than in neighboring Dak Lak province (ref a) and authorities appeared to have respond with relative restraint. The role of outside agitators - a constant theme - seems credible. End Summary.

Setting the stage with care

[1](#)2. (SBU) Missionoffs were met by provincial officials at the border with Dak Lak province and soon were in the midst of an eight-car motorcade of press, police, and national and local officials, with extra motorcyclists apparently following the group from place to place. Vietnamese journalists attended all meetings, with what appeared to be plainclothes police filming every moment. "Impromptu" discussions with villagers who were described as having taken part in protests similarly took place with press cameras and microphones thrust into interviewees' faces, local officials providing translation between ethnic languages and Vietnamese - and often going so far as to prompt respondents' answers - and men who appeared to be undercover police pulling subjects aside for a quick word before they talked with missionoffs. Even during the evenings, plainclothes officers appeared to be following missionoffs and FSNs.

[1](#)3. (U) Authorities nonetheless allowed visits to the three districts - Chu Se, Dak Doa, and A Yun Pa - where missionoffs had heard from both official and non-government sources that most of the demonstrations had taken place. In each of these districts, missionoffs were able to travel to communes that had been the scene of protests, and talk with local officials and protest participants.

The official line

[1](#)4. (U) Chairman Nguyen Vy Ha of the Provincial People's Committee met officers on April 27. According to Ha, the demonstrations took place in nine locations in three districts, involved people from 30 villages, and had a total of no more than 1000-3000 participants, Ha claimed. They were confined to rural areas and commune headquarters, he said, never reaching even district capitals, and with only a minor disturbance near the provincial capital of Pleiku. Ha claimed that about 100 people were detained on the day of the protests. As of April 27, only 10 "ringleaders" were still being held and may face judicial action; all others were let go "within two days" of the protests. He described the death toll as including one militiaman and two protesters killed (by rocks thrown by other protesters, Ha claimed), as well as injuries (none serious) involving 20 protesters and 40-50 police, militia, and officials. Ha admitted the presence of a government helicopter in the area on April 10 but claimed it was doing a land survey, not involved in stopping the protests. (Note: some organizations have alleged that an army helicopter was used to suppress the demonstrations.)

[1](#)5. (U) Chairman Ha alleged that the protests were all sparked by "outsiders," and that the demonstrators had even been told they would be picked up by planes and taken to the USA, or had been promised money for taking part. He said that when local officials explained to the protesters that

this was not the case, most dispersed, leaving only "a few" who then clashed with police and militia. Ha said that a small number of the protesters had been armed, and that, while the demonstrations had been smaller than in 2001, they were more carefully prepared and "more bellicose," with some protesters clashing with officials and militia members immediately upon encounter.

16. (U) As to what caused the demonstrations, Ha pointed solely to outside instigation by Kok Ksor, whom he depicted as leading "FULRO under the guise of the Montagnard Foundation." Ha said he recognized that the USG did not support the Dega movement, but commented that "your actions do not match your words." Ha cited the previously planned Mission trip to the Central Highlands on April 10, a Mission request to visit the Highlands "one hour" after the protests began in 2001, and the Mission's current visit as "brazen behavior" that raised "suspensions." He said the US Administration had "taken Kok Ksor in," mused about "just how deeply involved you are," and declared that "you are impinging on our national security." Ha also made negative reference to "a certain organization that I think you know" which was "giving grants" for people to return to Gia Lai to live. (Note: This may have been a reference to the UNHCR, although no officially resettled refugees have been brought to Gia Lai. End Note)

17. (U) Ha played a video showing parts of a demonstration in G'lar commune of Dak Doa district, including several scenes involving perhaps 300-500 demonstrators. Several protesters wore masks, and some threw stones or held large sticks. There were some apparent civilian authorities visible, but no police. In one scene, a fire truck hosed protesters with water. The video also showed some government buildings and vehicles with broken glass or minor damage, some militia with minor scratches, and one badly cut and bruised man - identified as a militia member - in a hospital bed. (Comment: The clash depicted in this video appeared far less intense and less violent than in the video shown to missionoffs in Dak Lak. End comment)

18. (U) The media was present for - and widely reported on - the meeting with Chairman Ha. Missionoffs requested to hold the discussions without the press present, but Ha insisted that "there was nothing to hide." After lengthy debate, he agreed, however, to reserve a final 20 minutes for discussion without the press. During this private period, Ha scolded the US Mission for "acting differently" from other embassies and for frequently trying to "break away" from the schedule provincial authorities had prepared. Ha also warned that many of the "deceived minorities" bore grudges against Americans. He claimed it was up to the province to make sure missionoffs were always escorted by police and officials.

No religious participation

19. (U) Ha denied any religious angle to the demonstrations. Nguyen Thanh Cam, Deputy Chairman of the Gia Lai Department for Ethnic and Religious Affairs, reiterated this point. Cam said that he had personally made fact-finding trips after the protests, and found that Protestants and Catholics "had not taken part." He added that religious services had taken place as normal on Easter Sunday.

110. (SBU) In a meeting arranged by the province, Pastor Siu Y Kim (protect) of the Gia Lai board of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) confirmed that local Protestants were not involved in the demonstrations, but predicted that "it is inevitable" that "some" provincial officials will connect the April 10 events and Protestantism. Kim added that, while he believed the protests had been "arranged" from the outside, problems in the province had "deep roots," including "discrimination" against ethnic minorities and government-imposed restrictions on the ability of SECV to meet the spiritual needs of the province's Protestant believers (without giving specific examples).

11. (SBU) Note: Provincial authorities appeared to be at pains to limit missionoffs' ability to speak with Pastor Kim. Authorities rearranged the schedule at the last minute to cut the meeting to half an hour, but gave Kim a completely different time for the meeting. Despite a request by missionoffs for a private session with Kim, Gia Lai authorities called Kim directly to urge that they be included. Subsequently, press and officials repeatedly tried to enter the room and also photographed proceedings through the windows. When the meeting went past its allotted time, authorities entered the room and tried to end the discussion. Similar harassment has been experienced during officially-arranged meetings with the SECV in Gia Lai during visits before April 10, however. End note
In the Districts

12. (U) Nguyen Dung, the chairman of Chu Se district in southern Gia Lai, said about 1500 people "had been incited" by about "200 troublemakers" to protest in several different parts of his district. The largest protest included 150-170 ethnic Jarai participants; other demonstrations numbered no more than 50 protesters. The ringleaders told people that they would be taken to the USA, having been incited by Kok Ksor - who sent \$15,000 to the district for the purpose. "Outsiders" coordinated the demonstrations by calling or sending written messages to "local toughs" telling them where to protest; Dung did not explain how he knew this. Dung said only three ringleaders from the clashes were still being held and would be tried. He predicted, however, that their sentences would only be three months long.

13. (U) Dung escorted Missionoffs (and press entourage) to a site in Ia Le district where a protest had taken place. A Jarai demonstrator recounted how he had seen a group gathering on the morning of April 10, and had joined in after being told he would "benefit" from the protest, although he said he was not clear how. The participant added that about 50 people demonstrated in that place, but they quickly dispersed without injuries. He said "some" participants had been detained but none were still under arrest. Two participants remained "in hiding," however.

14. (U) In Dak Doa district, just north of the provincial capital of Pleiku, District Chairman Pham Ngoc Chien said about 300 people participated in three of the district's communes. Chien said that the protesters made no political claims, but came carrying "rice, rocks, and alcohol." He confirmed that there had been no serious injuries in his district, that all detainees have been released, and that "life had returned to normal." In Ko Dang commune of Dak Doa, the commune chairman - an ethnic Ba'na - recounted that about 100 protesters - many of them drunk - had set upon the commune headquarters by throwing rocks, breaking windows, smashing equipment, and chasing and attempting to strangle him. He said that there were only about ten militia protecting the building as the local authorities tried to defuse the situation.

15. (U) The Ko Dang commune chairman said nine local people had been arrested and all had been transferred to Dak Doa district; he admitted two were still being held. An ethnic Ba'na participant in those demonstrations said that "masked men" came to his house on April 10 at three in the morning, saying they were going to have a "coup d'etat." The demonstrator professed to poloff - and surrounding police and press - that his reason for protesting was that "the commune was not doing enough to implement the great national unity policy." He estimated the number of participants at about 100, and said all had been released and no one was still in hiding. (Note: It appeared that a local official serving as a translator prompted some of these answers. End note)

16. (U) In G'Lar commune of Dak Doa district, the commune chairman said 300 people had demonstrated in front of the commune headquarters, and that only 10-12 "extremists" had thrown rocks. The chairman said that only local militia and officials - all of them ethnic Ba'na - countered the demonstrators, and that nobody had been arrested. A participant in the demonstrations said that "bad elements" came promising him money to take part in the demonstrations, but claimed that nobody had been injured or remained in hiding.

17. (U) In A Yun Pa district, in southeastern Gia Lai, district chairman Le Vinh recounted how the local Jarai minorities had been "deceived" by outsiders, and added that most of the estimated 200 protesters in his district were stopped en route to an old USAF airstrip, where they believed airplanes would meet them. He said that the protesters had mostly been unarmed, but many carried household belongings and food for their trip abroad. Vinh said that there had been no violence and that demonstrators had dispersed quickly when they understood that they had been deceived. A local Protestant church leader in A Yun Pa separately echoed that the protests had been limited, and said there was no religious element to them. One protester claimed he and his wife joined 15 other families traveling to the airport simply because other people had told him to do so. He said he had believed the demonstrations were to request the release of people detained after the 2001 unrest.

18. (U) In P'Rel commune (also spelled Rbol), near A Yun Pa district, a village headman and an individual who had observed the protests said that about 300-400 individuals - most from other villages - had been traveling to the old airstrip and were blocked at a bridge by local authorities and militia members. They said most of the people had returned home, but some had become upset and thrown rocks and fought with militia members. The observer said most of the groups traveling to the airstrip were families, and many

seemed to have no idea where they were going or why. Both claimed no one had been seriously injured, and said they did not know of anyone arrested or in hiding.

Comment

19. (SBU) Despite the tightly controlled nature of this visit, it appears clear that numbers of participants, arrests, injuries, and perhaps deaths are likely higher than officials admit but dramatically less than claimed by overseas groups. It is notable that the province allowed Missionoffs access to all sites requested - albeit under strict observation. The GVN seems to be following a similar "openness" (relatively speaking) track with other groups, admitting three international wire service journalists (but excluding AFP) to the Highlands April 25 to 28, as well as Vatican Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs Pietro Parolin on April 30 and an expected delegation from the Canadian, New Zealand, Norwegian, and Swiss Embassies May 9-13. The most alarmist reports from the region seem false; there were no burned out buildings; plenty of young men were hanging around the villages watching the visiting foreigners; no grief-stricken widows or parents blurted out accounts of murdered relatives. The greatly outnumbered police and militia on April 10 and 11 appear to have responded with relative restraint. During this visit, however, the constant police and official presence gave no opportunity for missionoffs candidly to canvass local residents. The hand of outsiders - a constant theme of local and provincial authorities - appears credible, as do long-standing complaints about discrimination, land disputes, restrictions on religious practice, etc.

BURGHARDT